

Interview with Nelson Perez
First President of the Hispanic Firefighters Association of
Newark, NJ

Interviewer: Olga J. Wagenheim

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At The Newark Public Library

- O.J.W. When we first met you were with the Hispanic Firefighters Association of Newark. Would you tell me a little bit about the association? When was it founded?
- N.P. Well, I like to begin first by telling you that there were several firefighters back in the early [19] 90's, approximately 1990, that had some issues and discussions with a black group in reference to representation with the Latino firefighters in government. They were sitting around, thinking how they could be a voice and what have you because there was an organization called the Welcome Pioneers, which would always go and say that they spoke for the Latino community. So these young Latinos gathered, and they actually started having their meetings at the Park Avenue Firehouse, which was Engine 15 and / ? / quarters. What they started to discuss how they wanted to be a social club; how they can get this going. They were talking month after month, but really did not get started [until] around 1992. That is when they decided to start having formal meetings and had their first event, which was over at Casa Vasca in the Ironbound section of Newark. They actually started having their formal meetings at FOCUS, which is a Latino organization here in the downtown area of Newark. They had for about a year or so before they were told, because they were meeting during the day, that they would have to find another location that would serve their needs. Truthfully, it was more like a social gathering for the guys and their families until 1994 when they decided to incorporate. Arnold Almaguer, Jaime Sanchez, who became the first President of the organization. They decided to incorporate under the name, The Hispanic Firefighters Association of Newark. The attorney was Mr. Scalatta, also from the Ironbound who began the process. And actually, after that happened, unbelievably, within the next couple of months the actual guys who sat at the table were: Arnold Almaguer, Ray Añeses...
- O.J.W. Añeses?
- N.P. Yes. Gunther Albino, Paul Rodriguez, Artie Sandujo, David Giordano, plus several others. If I am leaving someone out I will get back to you.
- O.J.W. Sure.
- N.P. They had their discussions and they were the actual founding fathers of the organization. But unfortunately, what happened is that Jaime Sanchez retired; he was forced to retire and a few others went into different endeavors. The organization was dormant for about two years. Actually, early in 1996, I was approached by Arnold Almaguer who was still around. He was very passionate about getting this off the ground because there were still discussions and issues within the Fire Department about Latino representation. He approached me, [laughing], actually he was nagging me, he would always ask me to donate money to start this organization. We gave him the money and he approached a few other guys. Basically in that era there were only about 15 [Latino] firefighters in the entire Newark Fire Department. There weren't that many Latino firefighters. We

sat at a table in that time, and I actually gathered the Latinos that were around at a meeting at the Newark Firemen's Union to ask if we could move forward and have this organization move off the ground. The original bi-laws were prepared by Paul Rodriguez and his wife Veronica. But we wanted to really formulate a strong organization that would last. But we also wanted to be very clear that our purpose was not just for our personal issues within the Fire Department, that it was more for community service, to give something back to the Latino community because we were fortunate enough to receive that gift of working with our people. We formulated that meeting. From that meeting it was decided that we were going to have elections. From those elections in the month of December of 1996 I became first official President of the Hispanic Firefighters Association of Newark. From that, what actually transpired was that we got an entire Executive Board, which were all elected. The Vice-President was Luis Sanabria.

O.J.W. Luis Sanabria?

N.P. Yes. The recording secretary was Raul Malavé. The Sergeant at arms was Juan Ramos and the [president of the] Board of Director was Frank Torres. The last person slips my mind.

O.J.W. It is okay. I will get you a transcript of this and you can look it over and correct it.

N.P. From that, our legal counsel [was] Felix Lopez Montalvo, Esq. from Mt. Prospect Avenue [Newark] and we began that same year; that year was very eventful year because our first endeavor as an association was that we wanted to be known in the community that we were there to service them. We had a benefit softball game in April; we played against other firefighters of Newark. We generated about \$1,000 and our first donation was to the "Make A Wish Foundation," which provided a gift to a terminally ill child. That was our very first fundraiser. And from that we grew to participate in the Fiestas Patronales (hometown celebrations), where we generated funds. The purpose of these funds, we accumulated about \$4,000 in a four-day span, was to set up a scholarship fund and a sports fund. We began by doing \$4,000 scholarships for the Latino kids in Newark in the public school system. We sponsored two little league teams in the Roberto Clemente Little League teams. From there, in 1997, I believe, we expanded by having another Little League that we sponsored and we had our first Hispanic Firefighters Association Scholarship Gala where we presented those scholarships. This was actually a joint collaboration. I had a meeting with José, whose last name will come to me in a little while; I am terrible with names. He was the President, at the time, in Jersey City, of the Hudson County Hispanic Firefighters. We decided that we were going to have a joint dinner. At that dinner we presented four \$1000 scholarships. It was a wonderful event. It was held in Jersey City at Hudson Park Banquet Hall. From there we continued to grow.

- O.J.W. O.K. Well, you have told me some very interesting things here. First of all you said that there were only fifteen Hispanic firefighters at the time.
- N.P. In the Newark Department.
- O.J.W. Was one of your goals to attract more Latinos into the profession?
- N.P. Most definitely. One of the goals that we targeted that year was recruitment. I formulated [sic] a committee with several guys; several members and we actually did a training exercise with the Newark Firefighters Union, which invited us to participate in the training exercises. For those who don't know it takes about three years before you can have a test and to actually have participation and usually from a list of thousands they only pick about 45 firefighters every three years. It is a very difficult task to get Latinos on the job. Also just to get regular firefighters.
- O.J.W. Is it a question of stamina? Is it a question of height? What are the requirements to be a firefighter?
- N.P. In that era it was a question of physical strength. The testing was geared towards the physical end of it. It required a lot of strength to survive the exam. Strength and speed and a lot of agility. At that time, like I said, they did not offer that many openings. The department does not have that many openings.
- O.J.W. Is it the kind of job without much turnover?
- N.P. It is a career that many people don't want to leave. It is a wonderful career, so they survive the 25 years.
- O.J.W. Were you successful in recruiting a lot of Latinos or ...
- N.P. We feel today, the year 2003, we feel very successful because, like I said to you before given that every three years you get a few, we increased the number from 15 to 60 at this moment. In the last recruitment classes we had an incredible influx of Latinos because not only have we done a better job of recruitment, but they believe that they can make it. They believe they have an opportunity.
- O.J.W. How do you spread the word?
- N.P. Basically, we hit the streets, we walk the city of Newark and go to the four wards and talk to the children, the young adults in the high schools. We inform them of the opportunities; we inform them about the career and the other opportunities within the department, that it is one family, not individuals.
- O.J.W. Did you start out as firefighter?

- N.P. I actually started out in 1996 as a firefighter, in July 29, for the Newark Fire Department.
- O.J.W. O.K. and who recruited you?
- N.P. Actually, I was not recruited. I, because of an injury I had, I was not able to be a State Trooper in the 103rd NJ State Trooper class. I was injured and I was not able to complete. It was around the time my wounds were healing [that] I noticed the applications being spread out by a captain from the Park Avenue Fire House, John *Sarratto* ?, who was gracious enough to give me an application. That's how I was started out.
- O.J.W. Whenever one interviews it is tempting to go into the personal history of the person versus the history of the organization. We will do a little bit of both. You mentioned that you had been in the law enforcement...
- N.P. My dream [was] two dreams. One was to be a professional baseball player. That was short lived. The second one was to be in law enforcement, yes.
- O.J.W. And that did not materialize because of the wounds?
- N.P. Yeah. I had a *rotor cuff* ? tear and I was not able to complete the academy, but I was fortunate enough, I believe that it was not even a year later that I was able to take the firefighter's exam. But I went there with the premonition that Fire Department also has law enforcement personnel, which most people are not aware of. I had a short career as a firefighter, for five years, and now, presently, the past 12 years I have been a detective in the Newark Arson Squad. So I have fulfilled my dream.
- O.J.W. You have fulfilled your dream in a round about way!
- N.P. Laughing, a long journey!
- O.J.W. The mission you mentioned of the organization, to give back to the community: how would you define it?
- N.P. Our thought was to go within the community to speak to the young adults, with all the difficulties and the tragedies here, with all the violence that we were seeing, with all the issues that are within our Latino community a lot of people who receive the good jobs they forget where they come from. We did not want to forget where we came from. I am not originally Newark bred, but I felt that Newark was a great place to make sure that our children knew where we were from and what were our intentions, where we wanted to go. Because we became professional firefighters or police officers, that was not enough. We had other dreams and other goals to fulfill. So, this is the beginning stages of where [we] want to be as a people, down the road.

O.J.W. How long have you been in Newark?

N.P. Since the early [19] '80s.

O.J.W. You mentioned that you have seen changes?

N.P. Many, many changes.

O.J.W. Are the changes for the better or for the worse?

N.P. Well, there are always good and bad. For the most part as a Latino, we have grown in every capacity. We have taken small steps, but we have earned them, and I feel that we are going on the right track.

O.J.W. Another thing you mentioned is that you were elected the first President of this organization, yet the founders were other members. Why did they choose you?

N.P. Well, [laughing], I guess because I was a little outspoken at the time. My background was that I was a plant manager in a corporation earlier, so I had executive skills and I felt comfortable with my skills to represent the organization.

O.J.W. Which corporation was this?

N.P. I worked with the American Bearing Corporation and it is in Fairfield, NJ. We used to do / ? / bearings and what have you, so I had some administrative skills and they felt comfortable that I had background in *[fire suppression?]* and what have you, but that I also came from another world.

O.J.W. You did not want to continue the corporate...

N.P. No, I am a person that always looks down the road longevity wise, and I felt that that business was not going to survive the economic development. It was government work and government work comes and goes.

O.J.W. I see. But firefighting, too, is government work, no?

N.P. Yes, but a firefighter's position will never be gone; we will always have it. Our structures are so that our structures won't last forever. Unfortunately, there will always be fires. That's permanent employment.

O.J.W. What kind of academic training does a firefighter require?

N.P. Well, basically to get on the job, the requirements are a High School diploma or a G.E.D. and obviously you need to have a clean record and to pass the physical end of it. But we as Latinos when we were recruiting we were encouraging to

continue their education. As I said to you before, this is just a start in life. This is not the ending in life. We have to plan for the future and maybe you want to add on to your life. Most of the Latino firefighters who come on, come on with some college background, and presently they own their own businesses or are moving onto other careers as well.

O.J.W. I noticed the names of the individuals who were the founders. You were talking about Luis Sanabria, Raul Malavé, Frank Torres, Hector Diaz, Ray Añeses, Arnold Almaguer, Gunther Albino, Artie Santiago, David Giordano. Is David Giordano Latino?

N.P. No, David Giordano is Italian. We are blessed because he has advanced to become the President of the Firefighters Union and he has been tremendously supportive throughout the years in the Latino community, encouraging Latinos to join the Fire Department.

O.J.W. He is someone from outside the group that believes in the group?

N.P. Correct. Many non-Hispanics that are members of our organization that believe in the Latino efforts and the Latino advances in the community.

O.J.W. As a group, do you find the firefighters to be more supportive of the Latinos than let's say, other groups?

N.P. We are extremely supportive.

O.J.W. Gunther Albino. That is an interesting first name. Any story there?

N.P. Actually, I can't tell you. But Ray Añeses' father was the Deputy Mayor of Newark.

O.J.W. Oh! I noticed in your introduction that you wanted to give back to the community in the form of support of the little leagues and [offering] scholarships. What was the intention behind the scholarships?

N.P. I personally felt, and my recommendation to the committee was that, one of the hurdles that we as Latinos had to climb was that some of us did not have the opportunity to get a college education either through hardships or just lack of information at the time, that the best thing that we could possibly do was to go to the youth and tell them that we could help and guide them if they [were] from single parent families. And hope we lead them in a direction, encourage them to obtain a higher education. The way I believe the Latino group is going to grow within our community is through education. So the building block is to get them not to be satisfied with a High School diploma, but to get them to obtain a college degree and so on, so that we grow as a Latino community together. So we felt

that a scholarship was very important and it was one of the building blocks to bettering the Latino family.

O.J.W. Is this a one-time scholarship or do you give them ongoing support?

N.P. Unfortunately, because of the low membership our organization can only give one time.

O.J.W. What is the object behind supporting the Little Leagues?

N.P. The basis is to be part of the community. Some of the firefighters actually coach the teams. None of the firefighters had children in them. We wanted to make sure that this was not a personal thing that this was a thing that we really cared about that we cared about our children in our community.

O.J.W. So it was not their sons they were coaching?

N.P. No, our first coach was Carmen Maya, who is a young man who grew up in the city of Newark and participated in the Little League and wanted to give back as a firefighter and as past participant in the Little League. Carmen Maya was our first coach. The other coach was Hector Diaz. He does not have children in the League either, but he still participates as a coach in the Roberto Clemente Little League.

O.J.W. Where do they play?

N.P. The Roberto Clemente Little League plays in Branch Brook Park, in the North Ward section of Newark. We are up to three teams now that we sponsor. We sponsor three teams in the North Ward community of Newark and we sponsor one in the African American community, which is in the South Ward of Newark. It is either in the South or the Central Ward. It is on the borderline. The Hank Aaron League. We have grown because we have also extended to females soccer teams. We have three female soccer teams we sponsor in the East Ward community. So we have expanded our programs throughout the years.

O.J.W. So, are these the two most important activities that you do to give back to the community: the scholarships and sponsoring the soccer teams and the Little Leagues?

N.P. That, plus we also speak at schools. We participate in school programs whether high schools or colleges, or grammar schools. We participate within the Fire Department community relations division. [We have] joint collaborations with those organizations. For the first time, back in early 2000 we were extended an invitation to sit on the [city] council with Councilman Tucker who wanted to hear our issues from the Latinos perspective because there was, like I mentioned to you earlier, it was implied that the Welcome Pioneers were our representatives. We

really had to let the city know that we had our representation. At that time Councilman Tucker heard our issues and he extended that invitation. Also around that time Commissioner Metz, who was the commissioner for the [NJ] Department of Personnel, had recognized The Hispanic Firefighters' Association of Newark and granted us a seat at the state level to sit there and participate in the formulation of future firefighters exam, promotions and recruitment. We were very honored that we were extended that invitation, we had a voice.

O.J.W. And these are things that came to you, not things that you went looking for?

N.P. No! These were actually invitations that came to us.

O.J.W. So that you are being recognized not only at the city level, but at the state level.

N.P. Yes.

O.J.W. You said that the organization has grown. I noticed when I first met you that you were with the Hispanic Firefighters and E.M.S. Association of Newark. When did that transformation occurred?

N.P. It started in the year 2000, when I was fortunate enough to meet a gentleman, Benny Cardona, who was a resident of Newark, and he happens to be an EMT technician for University Hospital...

O.J.W. What does E.M.T. stand for?

N.P. Emergency Medical Technician, that is the technician who operates the EMS (Emergency Medical Services) the drivers and technicians who tend to ailing patients. Whenever you see an ambulance drive by and a guy jump out, that is the EMT. He inquired how he could join our organization and we informed him that anyone could join the organization that we just wanted to make sure that fully understood what we were all about. After he attended several meetings, he was very impressed with our efforts and our organization and we were impressed with his enthusiasm that we develop the Hispanic Firefighters and E.M.S. personnel. So we renamed the organization to combine both the firefighters and E.M.S. personnel to continue to grow this organization. It is about our community and it is about our Latinos.

O.J.W. And this took place in 2000?

N.P. Yes, I believe it was in the year 2000.

O.J.W. I am sorry, I missed Cardona's first name.

N.P. Benny. In 2001 he became the first representative on the Executive Board for E.M.S. and became the Vice-President of the organization. We wanted to show

that we are truly committed, that this was truly one organization, well-rounded, and well-versed to serve. We were blessed to have our first female, which was Maritza Cortes, who also represent UMDNJ (University of Medicine and Dentistry of NJ).

O.J.W. Did you have to change the bi-laws of your organization?

N.P. Yeah, as a matter of fact, we changed the bi-laws. The bi-laws were guided and changed by Hector Diaz, who at the time was in the Executive Board. But we had changed the bi-laws back in [19] 98.

O.J.W. If it is not a problem, I would like to have both sets of bi-laws at one point for the Hispanic Research and Information Center Archives. I don't need them now, but at some point. Did the mission of the organization change, or was it kept the same?

N.P. The structure of the organization never waived. We are still under the same vision. We changed the name. That was basically it.

O.J.W. Do you have the vision of the organization written somewhere?

N.P. Yeah, we have a vision statement.

O.J.W. Do you have any historical background written about this organization, any papers...?

N.P. Basically, the documentation on how we were formed and on the events that we had.

O.J.W. One of the things that interests me, and I think may interest you as well, is to begin gathering the histories of these organizations because right now you remember who the people are and who did what, but in time that information gets forgotten...

N.P. Oh sure! Coming here today I had a little difficult task writing down and remembering and gathering all the information together, so that I had accurate information for you, who began and who is still working at this.

O.J.W. My idea, or vision of this is that we can reconstruct this information so that one day you can have a written piece of paper that says this is what the Hispanic Firefighters Association of Newark did, this is how it began, these were the founders; a mini history of each of them. And in the year 2000 we decided to join with E.M.S. I think it would make it something you can even give to recruits, when you are trying to recruit members...

N.P. Oh sure, that would be wonderful. That is a great idea.

O.J.W. I find that one of the problems we have as a community is that we are so busy doing that we don't have time to sit down and write. So, if you don't mind continuing the history after 2000 when Cardona became Vice-President of the organization.

N.P. Well, actually, if you don't mind, I would like to take a step back. I really like to recognize two people that were the guiding visionaries, I don't know if I am using the wrong words. They were very instrumental in this organization in the guidance. In our first Fiestas Patronales I was fortunate enough that a firefighter named Javier Cruz approached me. He'd wanted to introduce me to two young Latino leaders who he felt were important for me to speak to those two young ladies because they had a lot to offer as far as guiding organizations. Since in 1998 we became a non-profit organization these two young ladies came forward and gave us ideas that very day, in the middle of the Fiestas Patronales! These two ladies are Angie Armand, Director of the Center for Hispanic Policy, Research and Development [CHPRD] and Miss Brenda Jimenez, who at the time was working for United Way. These two young ladies were the guiding light that really brought the Hispanic Firefighters and E.M.S. organization together and really gave us shape. They were the ones that came forth and informed us how to be organized, how to be a professional organization versus a social club. We really blossomed from their work and wisdom.

O.J.W. So, even though you were interested in creating an organization you didn't know some of the steps about creating it?

N.P. Yes, right, as I said, most of the guys on this Executive Board were young who came into the Fire Department after High School. None of them had formal training per se and did not have the direction on how to guide the organization. Even though I had some administrative background, I did not have background knowledge in this. So, really, it was baby steps that we took. We were blessed to meet Director Angie Armand and Brenda. They were the ones who guided us as far as filing 501 (c) (3) non-tax status and we can reach out to the community in an easier fashion because we were basically walking and knocking on doors. We did not have wherewithal to go to FOCUS and Aspira and other organizations that already existed. We weren't familiar with their past history. So in collaborating with Angie, she brought us out and exposed us to the different organizations. There we were able to sit at the table and discuss our issues and how we could serve the community, also serve them as well. From there we joined and did [sic] partnerships with different organizations like La Casa de Don Pedro, with FOCUS, with St. Columbia and Aspira.

O.J.W. She helped you to network?

N.P. Oh yeah, without a doubt!

- O.J.W. Well, she is a very special person, a very special woman.
- N.P. She is a very special lady and very dear to the Hispanic Firefighters.
- O.J.W. She is very dear to a lot of us.
- N.P. [Laughing] She is very special!
- O.J.W. What about Brenda, have you stayed in touch with her.
- N.P. Oh Brenda, most definitely! Brenda, from the very beginning was one of the innovators who showed us the financial end of it and until today she is still part of it. She is an honorary member of the Hispanic Firefighters Association.
- O.J.W. Anyone else that you want to incorporate into this group? Or do you have to think about it? [Motions that he has to think about it]. Okay, going back to the chronology of the organization, had you done any other activities between 1997 and 2000 when you joined with the E.M.S.?
- N.P. We did various things. In the beginning stages, even before that, I recall going to Gateway One and doing a clothing drive and giving everything that we received to St. Augustine Church in Newark. We participated with the Lady of Good Counsel collections. We have participated with various organizations. During the hurricanes we participated with Maritza Falu in assisting in the clothing drive and fund [raising] drive with Councilman Quintana for Puerto Rico and Santo Domingo. Some of the firefighters traveled to deliver some of the goods.
- O.J.W. So, it was not just the annual activities, but whenever there was any kind of need...
- N.P. Definitely!
- O.J.W. In the beginning, how many people were involved in the core group of the organization?
- N.P. There were nine names. I am sorry I lost the piece of paper where I had written the names. But they all left before I got there.
- O.J.W. At any given time, how many working members did you have to your organization, as a Board?
- N.P. After 1996, after I came on, there were eight working members.
- O.J.W. So, all of the work you mentioned was done by eight working members?
- N.P. Yes, eight working members.

O.J.W. Are there no women in the Hispanic Firefighters?

N.P. No, there are women in the Hispanic Firefighters.

O.J.W. Is that more recent?

N.P. The only woman that was part of that Executive Board was Veronica Rodriguez who assisted with the bi-laws.

O.J.W. What did she do?

N.P. She actually wrote the bi-laws, with her husband Paul Rodriguez.

O.J.W. Was she just a supporting member of the organization?

N.P. Yes. They have since retired and moved to Florida.

O.J.W. On a personal note, you mentioned that your dream was to become first a baseball player, which did not materialize and then a law enforcement person, which you have come around to doing. Without violating any secrets, what is your job as a law enforcement person?

N.P. I am a detective in the Newark Arson Squad. We investigate all the fires in the City of Newark.

O.J.W. To determine there is no criminal intent?

N.P. Well, there are four types of fires and we have to give the designation and if there is a criminal situation then we have to incarcerate the individual and continue on. We conduct the full investigation. We are also the internal affairs of the Fire Department. So we conduct the investigations for the entire department. We also participated and we gathered information about the recent terrorism, checked anthrax or powder substances. We also partake in the investigation explosions. We were asked by the FBI to take part in the investigations of the World Trade Center.

O.J.W. Why is that? Why your unit?

N.P. Our unit is highly skilled and we supported the N.Y. Bomb Squad.

O.J.W. Are there many Latinos in that group?

N.P. At the present moment it's the highest it has ever been. We have four Latino detectives. Right now it is a minority office: four Latinos and 10 African-Americans.

- O.J.W. Is that because it requires special skills or because Latinos are slow in coming to this particular work?
- N.P. Basically, not many Latinos want to go into investigation work. Many are more apt to do the firefighting than to go into law enforcement end of it.
- O.J.W. And what motivated you?
- N.P. Well, my grandfather was the Chief of Police in Puerto Rico, in Guayama, and my father was a military police officer in the Korean War. So, I have always had law enforcement in my heart.
- O.J.W. Were you raised here or in Puerto Rico?
- N.P. No, I am a Newyorican! I was born in Brooklyn.
- O.J.W. So you are not a migrant!
- N.P. [Laughing] No, I am a Newyorican.
- O.J.W. When did you move to Newark again?
- N.P. I came to Newark in the early [19] 80s.
- O.J.W. What brought you to Newark?
- N.P. Well, actually, unfortunately my wife and I were going in separate directions and I felt that Newark was a good place for me to start.
- O.J.W. Sorry, I did not mean to get personal.
- N.P. It is okay.
- O.J.W. Going back to your motivation. You said that you wanted to give back to the community and here was an organization that promised to do just that. Do you feel that you have achieved your goal?
- N.P. Very much so. When we first started out people thought that this was a social club, or that we were looking for personal gains within the department. They have seen that, on the contrary, most of us do not participate in things for personal gains. At the present time there are few Latinos who are captains, who have been promoted. Many opportunities have been offered to achieve personal gains, but we refrain from that because it is not about us, it is about our community.

- O.J.W. So although you get promoted in the department it is not based on the activities you do in the community.
- N.P. Yeah. It is based on an examination that you take.
- O.J.W. You mentioned that you did one activity in Jersey City, with the head of the Hispanic Firefighters.
- N.P. Yes, he was the President at the time, José Cruz.
- O.J.W. Why did José Cruz reach out to Newark? What was in Newark that he felt was important?
- N.P. Well, it was basically in the Fire Service throughout the United States. Though there are many new Latino organizations in the East Coast region there were not a lot of representation within the Fire administration. So, if he had issues, you introduce them to your Fire Union, which is predominantly Caucasian and not to say that we are not being heard, but it has always been felt that if you have a larger organization that has Latinos that maybe we see changes within the Fire Service within the country. He, at the time was the highest-ranking Latino, because he was a captain, and he was actually searching if there were other captains throughout the state to speak to. At the time we met there was another captain, one of the first [Latino] captains in Camden, which was [?] Santiago. We tried to come to an understanding in how we could bring our groups together and to formulate a committee of all the organizations that would represent us whether it would be with the Department of Personnel or any other departmental issue. It never really got off the ground because we found out through our research that there is an organization called the Hispanic Firefighters Association that is nationwide.
- O.J.W. The corporate headquarters is where?
- N.P. The corporate headquarters is a revolving one, so every time they get a new President the corporate office changes. It is presently in Connecticut.
- O.J.W. What does this organization do for you, the members in Newark?
- N.P. Basically, that organization was formed so they have legislative representatives in Washington. That organization was extended an invitation by President Clinton's administration and they had a meeting with President Clinton.
- O.J.W. What are some of the issues that a Hispanic firefighter would want to be heard on?
- N.P. Well, years ago some of issues were based on the language barrier. Some of the young fellows who were coming directly from Puerto Rico did not have the

English language. They were not coming forth because they had fear of the exam. As time went on, they had bilingual examinations. Another issue was how we were going to encourage our youth to come forth for the testing.

O.J.W. What about issues of promotion or support within the organization once you made it?

N.P. Right now, the opportunities for promotion are limited in the Fire Service because there are only so many positions. In the Newark Fire Department, there are presently 500 members and of those almost 40% are security officers. The opportunities are not there because, like I said, once you become an officer, you are on officer for 25 years. It is not easy to relinquish the title. There is a long waiting list for promotions. It is not yearly. It is based on retirement. There may be 10 openings or 40 openings, depending on the retirement list.

O.J.W. So, it is not a question of merit or...

N.P. Taking an examination

O.J.W. If you pass the exam and score the highest...

N.P. It is based on ranking.

O.J.W. But the truth is that you have to wait a long time.

N.P. Yeah, a long period of time because the firefighters were Caucasian and in the recent years it has changed. There are 115 African-Americans, 60 Latinos, so the remainder are Caucasians. So it is balancing out now. That became possible because of the Consent Decree Order.

O.J.W. So it was not an organization that was opening its doors by itself. The door had to be pried open?

N.P. Yes!

O.J.W. Once you enter the profession is there any kind of discrimination?

N.P. Me personally, no. The firefighters have been a family, regardless of the personal opinions of individuals because of the seriousness of the profession everyone puts on a different hat. We live as a family; we act as a family. We act very professional. Not often do you see problems within the Fire Service.

O.J.W. The problem was entering? Once you enter you are accepted...

N.P. Once you enter, you are accepted. Generally, there is not a problem. You have less problems in the firehouse than you have at home.

- O.J.W. That is important to know. Because generally when organizations are founded they are founded to address certain issues.
- N.P. Well, the concern back then was really because there was no Latino representatives. It was the African-American Welcome Pioneers who came forth and said that they represented the Latinos, when in fact they had only one or two members. In essence we wanted to represent ourselves because they did not understand the cultural issues that affected us.
- O.J.W. I understand that in 2001, when Cordona became Vice-President was any weight placed on the organization to become one thing more than another?
- N.P. No, we always felt that everything had to be even across the board, even though there are only a few E.M.S. persons that came aboard. There are not that many [Latinos] E.M.S. in the State of NJ. That is where we are focusing on. Presently, Mr. Cardona and some of the others in the E.M.S. profession are in the process of recruiting more E.M.S. personnel. We are working on the elections to change the [process] because there is discrimination in the E.M.S. profession within the state of NJ.
- O.J.W. So that profession suffers more discrimination than the firefighting profession?
- N.P. At the present time, yes.
- O.J.W. Is it harder to recruit for the E.M.S. profession than to become a firefighter? Is it a question of education?
- N.P. Yes! It is more difficult for the simple reason that to become an E.M.T. technician you have to take a test, which is a difficult test, but it is something that is open to all. No one can discriminate against you in that segment. But to become an employee in the E.M.S. profession within a hospital, then there is the opportunity for discrimination. I am not saying that all hospitals discriminate, but I am saying that there are low numbers of Latinos working in E.M.S. within the State of NJ. We also see the difficulties of Latinos within E.M.S. for upward mobility, whether it is a rescue unit or paramedic. We have very low numbers in the Essex County region. I can't speak for the entire State of NJ. But in the Essex County region we have low numbers and we are trying to address that right now.
- O.J.W. How are you trying to address it?
- N.P. Well, right now have several young Latinos who are participating in elections, to be the union representatives so that they can be a voice to be heard and to guide future hiring practices.

- O.J.W. In the E.M.S. profession you have women and men?
- N.P. Correct. There are two women presently in the Newark Fire Department. Both are African-American.
- O.J.W. No Latinos?
- N.P. No, we are hoping that in the next recruitment class at least one woman will be hired.
- O.J.W. Is it the kind of job that is hard for a woman?
- N.P. Yes, firefighting is very difficult. It requires you to carry a lot of weight. The equipment alone that you have to carry on your back is 70 pounds. And if you have to do a rescue operation and carry a person down you are talking 200 pounds of physical strength. There are women out there who can do it, but there are few women who are vigorous enough to carry you down.
- O.J.W. The E.M.S. is a totally different...
- N.P. In the E.M.S. is very different. Yes, there is a physical requirement as far as carrying the patient, but it is not as rigorous as firefighting.
- O.J.W. Anything else that you would like to add about this organization that we may have left out.
- N.P. Well no, we have covered a lot of things. Basically, this was started with those goals, those ideals. I hope that when my career is done that we branch out and join many other things. Like I mentioned to you in the beginning, to us in the Latino community it is about education. Our goals are to have people within the department promoted to be at the level of Deputy or even the Director of the department either of E.M.S. or the Fire Department. We have these young people to guide our future generations of Latinos. We need these people. We need to reach those levels.
- O.J.W. I noticed that your organization...
- N.P. One thing I like to pride ourselves on is that in, don't quote me on the year, I will get back to you on that, Armando Roman was the first Latino director of the State of NJ, in the Fire Service, and even though he was the director in Jersey City, we were able to bring him here and he was the Grand Marshal in the Puerto Rican Day Parade. We were privileged to open the Parade. Then President Maritza Falu honored us, the committee honored us with opening the parade. It was a beautiful thing because we were able to get antique vehicles, we got 1928 limousines. Armando Roman and his family were the Grand Marshals of the

Puerto Rican Day Parade. That was a nice cultural aspect of our organization that we were able to share with the community.

O.J.W. I notice that you attend a lot of other organizational activities. You mentioned that you started out in FOCUS. What do you hope to bring when you join other organizations?

N.P. Basically, I am a member of several other organizations. I participate in the Center for Hispanic Policy, Research, and Development [CHPRD] . I participated in FOCUS with recruitment, spoken at schools about fire and police, both. I have always been asked to participate in different kind of services, like a single parents, church services for the poor and things of that nature. I am proud that I was selected as one of the representatives for the March of Dimes. Last year was the first time that the March of Dimes recognized Latinos. They have now Latinos on the Board, on the Executive Board. So, from the work that has been done with the Hispanic Firefighters and E.M.S. it has opened up opportunities for myself and the Executive Board to join other organizations to participate and share. We have shared our ups and downs. We participate with anyone who asks. We participate and share whatever we can whether it is with funding. Although our funding, whatever we gather for the year we give out. So we start at zero every year. It has opened up many opportunities. I was invited to be one in the Leadership program of United Way. So I am a graduate alumni of that as well.

O.J.W. Where do you meet?

N.P. We meet at 195 Mulberry Street, which is the Renaissance Café. We are presently working jointly towards acquiring a building, which is the Hispanic Law Enforcement and the Hispanic Fire. One day they will be in the same building and also have various other programs to offer to the community. Our long-term goal is to have a building where both organizations function and give programs to the community.

O.J.W. When we started the interview you told me that you were both Vice-President of the Firefighters Association of Newark and also the Law Enforcement Society of Essex County.

N.P. Yes!

O.J.W. So you are wearing many hats. In your role in the Hispanic Law Enforcement Society of Essex County, what motivated you to join that particular organization?

N.P. Well, like I always say, when an organization, what I have said to the membership was that when our organization was formulated was for the good and the need of the community. From that we branched out and we said that we needed to bond with other organizations and create a larger group of representatives that can voice an opinion and sit at a table, whether it was at Latino caucuses or any organization. Actually, what happened was in the year 2000, I believe, then the

President of the Hispanic Law enforcement, Sgt., Inez Gonzalez, we would go to different functions and different meetings and talk about the same issues and same goals we would look at each other and say, why aren't you part of this organization? And I had to answer that I was part of this organization. They asked me because of the passion I had for the community and for the kids. Though I did not serve officially, I was a participant of that Executive Board [Hispanic Law Enforcement Society]. There was a changing of the board and I ran with the administration of Jose Beltran who became President. At that time the 1st Vice-President was Tony Gonzalez and I became the 2nd Vice-President. But because of personal problems Mr. Beltran stepped aside and Tony became the President and I became the 1st Vice-President and served that term. From there we were asked to serve again. Presently, he is the President and I am Vice-President. I have worked with that organization, which basically has the same goals, but has been around for a long time.

O.J.W. Yes, I know. That organization was founded in 1975. I am not sure if they were all that active, but at least it was founded then.

N.P. It has been very active since 1975.

O.J.W. Oh, it has?

N.P. From the very beginning, the organization has been very active. Originally, it was more active in the recruitment end of it. Nowadays there are 400 Latinos on the job of the 1700 [law enforcers]. So there is a good representation of Latinos in the community in the Newark Police Department.

O.J.W. That is another interview that I would like to do, but that takes us in another direction. I will let you go because I know that you have to run. – When did Raymond Montalvo become the President of the Hispanic Firefighters?

N.P. In 2001.

O.J.W. How often do you have elections?

N.P. Every two years.

O.J.W. So his term is about up!

N.P. Yes, on December 22 [2003].

O.J.W. Did Raymond Montalvo introduce any changes in the organization: vision, goals?

N.P. Well, the vision and the goals have always been the same. But he did form the girls soccer program. He kept up with our tradition of sponsoring the teams. He

broadened the horizons because we are now participating in the North Ward of Newark. We hope to participate in the South in the future.

O.J.W. Is Raymond from Newark?

N.P. Yes. He is originally from the East Ward.

O.J.W. When did he become a firefighter, do you know?

N.P. That I don't know. He had served on our Executive Board prior to becoming President.

O.J.W. Is that part of the tradition to serve in the Executive Board and from there go on to become elected?

N.P. We encourage that someone from the Executive Board who has some knowledge, but it is not written in stone. So, if someone wants to run for President they are able to.

O.J.W. The person has to be from within the Hispanic Firefighters?

N.P. Oh yes. It is written in the bi-laws. To be in the Executive Board you must be Latino. To serve and participate in the organization you don't have to be Latino. But to serve in the Executive Board it is written in the bi-laws. And you must be an active member of the Hispanic Firefighters profession or the E.M.S. profession.

O.J.W. Do you have any kind of absence policy? When do you meet?

N.P. We meet once a month. We have in the bi-laws that if you miss more than three meetings you are automatically removed from office.

O.J.W. I think that is very good. I think that I am going to leave it here. There is a lot to digest. I have to transcribe this. I will share it with you so that you can make the appropriate corrections.

N.P. For the next go around, if you need additional information, I have already spoken to Arnold Almaguer, who is one of the original cast, to give you some more information. [His cell phone rang and I concluded the interview]

[The interview lasted approximately 45 minutes]